ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS
Luke 2:22, 36-40
January 2, 1983

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The December 13 issue of Time reported that Malcolm Muggeridge, at the age of 79, had publically confessed his faith and joined the church. For much of this century, Time reported, Muggeridge has been the "great gadfly of British letters, unleashing his rapier prose on much that civilization has held dear, including organized religion." A decade or so ago Muggeridge began to see Christianity in a new light while working on a BBC documentary, focusing on Mother Teresa of Calcutta and her work with the poor. Muggeridge was profoundly impressed with the selflessness. In the interim he thought, prayed, wrote a marvelous book on the life of Jesus. And now, he was ready to make his personal commitment. And so, in a small Roman Catholic parish church Muggeridge and his wife declared their faith. His reflections on the occasion I found, as always, provocative and well put.

He had, he said, "a sense of homecoming, a picking up the threads of a lost life, of responding to a bell that has long been ringing, of finding a place at a table that has long been left vacant." Afterward, "Muggeridge stepped out into the brisk English autumn air, and for once seemed content with all he surveyed. 'It's a particularly joyful sort of day' said he, 'It's rather like when you fall in love with a woman and ask her to marry you. You know there are no more questions to be asked.'" (Time, 12/13/82, p. 63)

That delightful accounting reminded me of nothing so much as the incidents reported near the end of the second chapter of Luke. Mary and Joseph had brought their infant to the Temple for the rite of purification. While there they encountered two elderly people. One, named Simeon, Luke reports, took the baby in his arms, like a loving grandfather, and said words which have become, over the centuries, the beloved Nunc Dimitis, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

The other person was Anna: eighty-four years old, a widow, a prophetess, who spent most of her time in the temple, praying. She saw the baby and she too gave thanks to God. Both appear in Luke as representatives of a people who have been waiting. Both, with the wisdom of the years, recognize the significance of Jesus. Neither of them, by the way, appear again in the Biblical narrative. Both, like Malcolm Muggeridge, indicate that what they have seen has blessed them with an illusive sense of completeness. "Now I can die in peace," Simeon said. "There are no more questions to be asked," Muggeridge echoed.

There is no theological significance I know of for the occurrence of Christmas and the New Year one week from each other, unless it is this: having seen the Christ child, aged Simeon and Anna knew that their own time now had a sense of completeness about it. To see Jesus is to know that something is ending and something new is beginning.

That motif is common in the Biblical narrative: unlike Eastern philosophies, history is not cylical in the Bible, predestined to repeat itself over and over in a monotonous continuum. Biblical history has a beginning and an end, a goal, a purpose. And with the grand sweep of things, individual histories are comprised of a series of endings and beginnings.

Life can be renewed: people can change: the old can be put to rest and the new brought to life. "Repent" John the Baptist shouted to his startled countrymen: that is, "start anew - become new people."

Ordinarily, however, our sensitivity to time is confined to the lament that there isn't enough of it. Michael Quoist speaks for most of us in this prayer:

"Lord, you must have made a mistake in your calculations.
There is a big mistake somewhere
The hours are too short,
The days are too short,
Our lives are too short." (Prayers, p. 98)

It seems that our greatest unhappiness, and our most frequent lament has to do with the scarcity of time. For middle class America, the common lament about how terribly busy one is has almost become a form of social greeting, or a positing of one's social importance. Empty time, it seems, is, if not immoral, at least suspicious. The truth about most of us most of the time, is that we are strapped, burdened, and unhappy because there are not enough hours to do what we must, with any remnant left over for doing what we want to do.

We march to the tick of the clock - the calendar appointment, the scheduled deadline. It is, on measure, a peculiar but good thing about us. Our promptness and time --- consciously have made us a very productive people. It does not take many days living in another culture to discover one of the major reasons for American efficiency: namely, the high value we place on time and its use. Labor saving devices save time as well: a machine which does the work of 20 people, frees their time to invest elsewhere. And yet, as Marshall McLuhan reminded us several years ago, every technological advance is accompanied by a loss of something.

What we have lost, I believe, is what could only be called a philosophic sense that we have enough time to do what we ought to be doing. We have the capacity to end some things and to begin new ones. Unfortunately it takes a tragedy or near tragedy sometimes to learn the lesson. The intrinsic value of the time we have is sometimes apparent only after we have lost a great deal of it. Isn't that what really is behind the wish that we were young again? Now we know how precious that time was.

Sam Keen is a theologian philosopher who went through a classic mid-life crisis in the 70's, leaving church, profession, marriage, and family behind, in order to participate in the new revolutionary experiences of our culture. He has written a remarkable book about it in which he confesses: "By infidelity I learned that vows may be sweet bonds that tie us to the earth. Through exile I learned that I cannot live without a home." (p, 93) And then: "so long as we evade the fear of coming to an end we never begin or begin again." (p. 40)

The coming of Jesus Christ means that there are always new possibilities in time. There is, that is to say, hope. We are not predetermined to die in a nuclear holocaust. Nor personally, are we predestined to keep repeating old habits, old customs which are destructive, hurtful, unhappy. We can change - begin again.

One of my favorite quotes is from a speech a professor made once at a library dedication. Instead of the normal academic fare one expects on that occasion, he decided to tell students and faculty what he had learned through the recent death of his wife...It had to do with time. Citing an Emily Dickinson poem that goes:

"By a departing light
We see acuter, quite,
Than by a wick that stays.
There's something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays."

He commented, "It's a sense of the ending that makes the beginning and all that follows therefrom, so much more meaningful." He gave wise advice about the time to love. "Love them while you can," he said, "and never, never be embarrassed...Look at things not only as if you were seeing them for the first time, but as if you were seeing them for the last time, and had to take them all in and remember them forever..."

I suppose next to our static concept of time, our greatest error, in this context, is the assumption that present time is simply preparation for the future: that hope, success, joy, meaning will happen someday, but not now. We need, all of us, the lesson in time which teaches that this is the only life we are going to live. There will never be another January 2, 1983. Whatever significance this day is to have - will be experienced today...period...

I am suggesting that to know who the child is, is to believe in the possible, to embrace the power of God which makes all things new - even your life and mine. I am suggesting the simple discipline of surveying one's life and putting to an end what one doesn't want there, and resolving to begin what one hopes, strives for and wants for the future.

The birth of Jesus after all - is aittle more than harmless sentiment, until it begins to make a difference in the world. And it does that, not through some mysterious cosmic process, but as individual men and women know the love of God, and respond to it by resolving to live new lives. Peace in the world - reconciliation between two people - won't happen miraculously - but slowly, painfully, laboriously, as individuals begin to stop acting in old ways and begin to act in new ways.

With the wisdom of her years of waiting, old Anna saw in the infant Jesus the beginning of something brand new - for her people - for history - and for her personally. The waiting was ended. The future was beginning.

So today, one week after we celebrated the birth, we observe the passing of time. I am suggesting that, by God's grace, it may be a time of ending and beginning for us as well. As Simeon and Anna saw the end of the old and the beginning of the new, so let us come to table - to celebrate the miracle of incarnation, the mysterious presence of God - but also to renew our faith, our trust, our love, our obedience. AMEN.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a source of hope and strength precisely because it begins with the ordinary - the radically human. It's essence is truly not the most glorious "Gloria in Excelsis Deo," with organ and trumpet, but this most ordinary birth. It's strongest manifestations is not, therefore, high communion at the high altar - but perhaps bedside communion with one whose life is ebbing. The Gospel is saving because it takes our life in this world at least as seriously as life in the next world. It is strength and help and hope for every day precisely because it began as all things human begin - with birth and the everday ordinariness of a mother and a father and their new baby.